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SUBJECT: KERALA ELECTIONS: EXIT POLLS POINT TO A LEFT
FRONT VICTORY

REF: CHENNAI 0567

1. SUMMARY: (SBU) Peaceful polling and unanimous exit poll results predicting a Left Front victory marked the first and second phases of Kerala elections, which cover 90% of the state. The remaining constituencies will vote on May 3. Despite the Congress leaders' media bravado, they privately admit pessimism over the outcome. As a key element of their campaign, the leftists successfully whipped up Islamic passion against Congress' perceived support for U.S. policies in Iran and Iraq. The communal campaign raises concerns about future harmony in a state where Muslims constitute 24 percent of the population. END SUMMARY.

PEACEFUL POLLING; EXIT POLLS FAVOR LEFTISTS

2. (SBU) Amid wide expectations of a Left Democratic Front victory, 125 of Kerala's 140 assembly constituencies completed peaceful polling on April 23 and 29. The third and final phase of polling will take place in the remaining 15 northern constituencies on May 3. Voter participation percentage in the first phase was 69.78 and in the second phase, 73.49. The final results that will be announced on May 11 will declare who will rule India's highest literacy state for the next five years. But based on exit polls and the state's trend of anti-incumbent voting, many Keralites are already convinced that the Left Democratic Front (LDF), led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), is set to regain power after a gap of five years.

3. (SBU) According to The Hindu newspaper of April 30, all three exit polls conducted in the state point to an easy victory for the LDF. While the India Vision-AC Nielsen poll gave the LDF 87 of the 125 seats, the Asianet exit poll put the figure at 76 to 89, and Jeevan TV, at 95 to 98. With the remaining 15 constituencies that go to the polls on May 3 being traditional strongholds of the LDF, the exit polls suggest a huge final majority for them in the 140-member assembly.

CHANDY HOPES AGAINST HOPE; OTHERS LESS OPTIMISTIC

4. (SBU) Chief Minister Oommen Chandy told Post after the first phase of polling that the Congress-led UDF remains hopeful, claiming that they would win a

majority of seats in the first phase of the polling, and do much better in the second phase. He, however, did not sound convincing and was dismissive with the press when they asked about the exit polls. Congress leader, Chairman of Kerala Tourism Corporation, and former Minister Pandaram Sudhakaran (protect), was more forthright: "We are in a terribly poor condition," he told Post. "We might make 40-50 seats at best." Sudhakaran believes that last minute fence mending with the estranged Congress leader Karunakaran's faction did not create any positive impact. "In retrospect, it might have been better if we had just followed Oommen Chandy's line and kept Karunakaran at bay," he said. Minister K.C. Venugopal (protect), a young Congress leader, was more optimistic: he believes the Congress might gather 60-65 seats, still short of majority.

LEFTISTS WHIPPED UP ANTI-U.S. ISLAMIC PASSION

15. (SBU) The CPI(M) spent much campaign energy turning Muslim communal sentiment against the Congress party and its long-time ally, the Indian Union Muslim League. The GOI's perceived weakness in "resisting the U.S.' imperialist actions against Iraq and Iran" was one of the major themes of the state election campaign. M.M. Hassan (protect), a Congress leader belonging to the Muslim community, told Post that the issue had become a major poll theme in Kerala, which has 24 percent Muslim population. According to Hassan, the Iran-Iraq issue affected the Congress almost as badly as the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition,

CHENNAI 00000848 002 OF 002

"maybe about 75 percent the impact of Babri Masjid," he said. He pointed out that Muslim organizations such as the Jama-Ate-Islami and the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), which is led by Abdul Nasser Madani, an Islamic radical now in jail for his alleged role in the terrorist bombings in Tamil Nadu in 1998, openly campaigned for the LDF. In order to capture the Islamic hardliners' votes, the LDF also maintained open ties with the Indian National League, a faction that broke from the Indian Union Muslim League to pursue more vigorous communal politics.

HINDU REACTION MUTED; CONGRESS IN NO POSITION TO TAP

16. (SBU) Congress leader Hassan (protect) told Post that there has been no visible Hindu consolidation against the aggressive pro-Muslim campaign of the LDF. "The government is widely seen as being run by a Christian (Chief Minister Oommen Chandy), and supported by the Muslim League," he said. According to Hassan, this perception has put a damper on any groundswell of Hindu support. LDF propaganda branded the Indian Union Muslim League, which has partnered with the Congress in Kerala since the 1980s, as unresponsive to Muslim concerns, suggesting that they had ignored the Muslim community's interests while looking after their own personal agendas. Gowridasan Nair (protect), Principal Correspondent of The Hindu, went further and alleged that the Muslim League leaders had invited public wrath by their support for criminals such as those involved in the massacre of eight Hindus in Marad in May 2003. He believes that CPI(M) leader Achuthanandan has emerged as the hero of the 2006 campaign. Octogenarian Achuthanandan, reintroduced into the campaign by the party in response to popular demand, is one of the principal contenders for the Chief Minister's post, if the LDF gains a majority as expected.

INDIAN UNION MUSLIM LEAGUE LOSING SUPPORT

17. (SBU) The Indian Union Muslim League, traditional partner of the Congress, remains the largest Muslim political party in Kerala. But it has been slowly losing support among Muslims, especially Muslim youth. Many young Muslims have been attracted by either ultra-conservative Muslim religious groups or one of the many small Muslim parties that have broken away from the Union League. Other Muslims have joined the CPI-M, who with its strident criticism of India's growing connections with the U.S., they feel better represents their views.

GROWING COMMUNAL DIVIDE A CAUSE OF CONCERN

18. (SBU) COMMENT: It seems very unlikely that the Congress-led UDF will retain power in the face of Kerala's anti-incumbency history. Congress leaders' faint hopes seem to rest on the intra-party feud that prevails in the CPI(M) and which came to the fore when Achuthanandan was originally denied a seat to contest. Had the CPI(M) persisted with that decision, it could have resulted in major upheavals. But once the party yielded and gave Achuthanandan a seat to contest, it seemed to give the old party-line communist a larger than life image. Meanwhile, the communal undertones of the 2006 election campaign raise concerns about the future of communal harmony in the state with its high concentrations of Islamic population in the northern districts. END COMMENT.

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